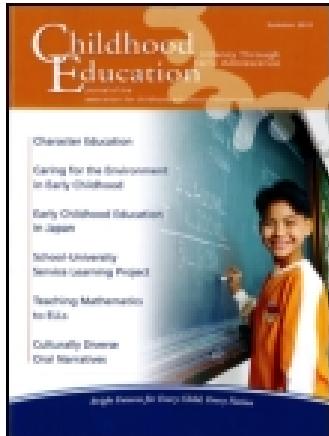


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When Children Feel Helpless in the Face of Stress

Reginald S. Lourie M.D. ^a & Charles Schwarzbeck III Ph.D. ^{b c c}

^a Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science , George Washington University , Washington , D.C. , USA

^b George Washington University School of Medicine , USA

^c Child and Adolescent Services

^d Psychiatric Institute

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When Children Feel Helpless in the Face of Stress

Reginald S. Lourie, M.D., and
Charles Schwarbeck, III, Ph.D.

STRESSFUL OCCURRENCES are inevitable in the experience of every growing, learning child. Most often, these expectable upsetting events are not traumatic or catastrophic, but rather are predictable developmental happenings.

All developmental experiences, even when stressful, are "organizers" in a sense. For example, the development of the smiling response of the infant is a beginning organizer for *trust*; so is the ability to get signals and communicate with caretakers. Fears of separation and anxiety about strangers are organizers for *independence*. Negativism and obstinacy of the "terrible twos" not only can create stressful confrontations but can also be understood as organizers of the child's *will*. The stresses and conflicts that often accompany toilet training can become organizers of *impulse control*.

Thus, even before children enter the classroom for the first time, they have already faced an expectable range of stresses. An-

swers to these stresses and unique methods of dealing with them are brought with children to school. There each child tries to deal with the new difficulties of the classroom and hopefully learn how he or she fits into this new part of the world—with the hope of subsequently finding other, better ways of dealing with stress. Additional developmental conditions, which to one degree or another are stressful, may originate in the classroom as a function of the process of education.

Stress may be manifested in the child's "inner world" as new ideas and experiences are explored. For example, on entering school, a child can worry about what happens if rules are broken, if the teacher gets angry, if others fight and about "What's wrong with me if I see letters upside down." Indeed, some stress is inevitable and has been described by Piaget as a necessary factor for learning (in his accommodation-as-simulation model).

*Some valuable, fresh insights for child-watchers!
"In this paper emphasis will be on how stresses
can affect the organization of children's thinking
and on how individual children respond
uniquely to them."*

*Reginald Lourie, M.D., is Professor Emeritus,
Child Health and Behavioral Development,
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science,
George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
Charles Schwarzbeck, III, Ph.D., is Clinical Instructor
in Psychiatry, George Washington University School of
Medicine (also Chief Clinical Psychologist,
Child and Adolescent Services, Professional Associates
of the Psychiatric Institute).*



—Susie Fitzhugh, Baltimore, MD

COPING WITH STRESS: SOME RESPONSE STYLES

In this paper, emphasis will be on how stresses can affect the organization of children's thinking and on how individual children respond uniquely to them. We will describe some children in whom a sequence of responses often follows their facing a stress situation in ways that can interfere with emotional and psychosocial capacities. An understanding of such responses to stress may permit the educator greater latitude in helping the troubled child—particularly the child who is especially vulnerable.

When you watch children carefully, you can see that some respond to stress by gaining a greater degree of organization of their thinking and acting. These fortunate children have an innate, "built-in" capacity to mobilize thinking. They act better under tension. Although an experience they face is stressful, these children do not become upset or worried, but instead seem to gain from it all. Such children mediate the stressful condition in a *flexible* way, integrating new schema. Their synthetic, cognitive capacities allow them to learn from the stressful event; and they accommodate to a great degree. These children have an easier time in dealing with crisis situations than a second group, comprised of the majority of their peers, who also usually find answers to crises and devise strategies for taking them in stride without adverse reactions.

The children in greatest need of our help are in a third group whose thinking and acting can disorganize in stressful situations. These children have what seems to be a constitutionally based difficulty in integration of anxiety or tension-producing experiences. To understand these unfortunate children within the framework of how their

experiences can then affect their feelings and adjustment, one must first be aware of this pattern of reacting. From very early in life—even from infancy—their response to stress is for the mind to go blank. They *dis-organize*; their self-experience can then be one of helplessness. Where this tendency is an exaggerated one, a few such children may even experience it as a feeling of catastrophe. In other words, they have a built-in makeup which leaves them at risk for becoming confused, disorganized and upset when they are stressed. This makeup interferes with their ability to move toward greater accommodation, and some of them protectively respond in rigid and almost paralyzed ways when they experience stress. They don't learn from experience or deal with the source of the stress, and they therefore have difficulty in finding answers to problems. Children tell us that the resulting feeling of helplessness is one of the worst in the world.

The child who disorganizes under stress is often one who has done so throughout each of the major psychological stages of development. Thus, by the time he or she begins school, there is an already-determined mode of dealing with any situations that are upsetting or about which the child is uncertain. In many instances, we are able to determine if children have this built-in disorganization problem by listening to their self-experiences of the learning process. Often children, if given the chance, will tell a parent or teacher about the disorganization. For example, they sometimes say, "All of a sudden everything went blank . . . I couldn't remember anything"; others have told us, "When it's my turn, I get a foggy feeling, and I can't listen to the teacher or even to myself"; others only hint at this terrible helpless feeling that abruptly presents itself without apparent reason. There is no formula to finding out who

these children are except to watch and listen carefully.

Once such children are identified, the next step is to try to understand how they deal with the disorganization to avoid a feeling of helplessness. Responses to the tendency to disorganize under stress vary in degree and in the amount of stress necessary to interfere with integration, as well as in quality and in severity with respect to their self-defeating nature.

Of the children who begin school with different kinds of learning difficulties (in our experience, perhaps as high as 25 percent of all first-graders), such as perceptual-motor problems, tendencies to reverse letters, auditory-processing problems, etc., a significant proportion are able to organize *better* under stress. Learning difficulties are typically and most easily overcome by the "super organizers," who are best able to integrate anxiety created by mild handicaps. The children who tend to become disorganized under stress are far more difficult to help with their learning problems. Indeed, we believe that the tendency to disorganize under stress and a subsequent self-defeating response coupled with a learning problem (which the "organizing" children would be expected to overcome) can set the stage for development of a chronic learning disability.

FIVE CHILDREN UNDER STRESS

Types of difficulties most likely to be brought into the classroom are illustrated by the following problems. We are not reporting the most severe types of responses to the tendency to disorganize, seen in some autistic children, or the more complicated adjustment patterns in those who have other handicaps, such as forms of neurological damage seen in some cases of cerebral palsy.

A relatively common form of reaction in school was shown by James, a bright 8-year-old who became disorganized when unsure of himself. When about to be called on in class or to take a test that he worried about failing, James learned that his thinking fell apart. To ward off the resulting feeling of helplessness, he ingeniously—but in a self-defeating way—proceeded to make others feel helpless. In class he would run around and make noise. On the playground, when unsure of himself in a game, he would make the other children helpless by disrupting the game. The first step in helping him to give up these patterns was to create an awareness of what he was doing and then to help him see why he was doing it. Other tactics to deal with the disorganization were also shared with him (see below).

Sam, a sad, depressed twelve-year-old, wept upon being confronted with changes in his everyday routine. He came to our attention when his parents separated and his poor school performance became even poorer, so that he was shifted to a special class. Sam had always tended to isolate himself whenever he had difficulty in social adjustment or faced failure. The new changes brought even more feelings of anxiety and stress than he had had before. Upon discovery of his tendency for thinking and acting to become disorganized, his depression disappeared and he showed relief. A remedial program began to help Sam recognize the beginning signs of disorganization, which he developed tactics to overcome. At the same time, his underlying separation anxiety began to disappear as he gained increasing self-confidence.

Evelyn, age 10, was preoccupied with thoughts of accidents and death, which were interfering with her functioning, both at school and at home. A study revealed that she tended to disorganize under stress by

changing the subject. However, the helplessness that resulted from her thinking about "falling apart" ignited her still-active fear of body damage, which usually became the subject her mind shifted to. Her personality makeup was marked by a tendency to feel that once something happened, it would keep on happening. Corrective approaches included help in concentrating on not changing the subject and suggested methods for stopping herself when she began to fall apart, so that she could collect her thoughts again.

□ Lewis, a 14-year-old adolescent, was referred for study because he was heavily involved with marijuana and hashish, as well as experimentation with other drugs. He repeated two grades in the last three years. His use of drugs was apparently a form of self-medication to relieve poor self-confidence, which had roots in his problems of integrating thought when he became anxious. Lewis' poor self-image had made earlier peer relationships difficult, but his drug use made it possible for him to at least be sought out by the drug dealers. Since drugs had further loosened his thinking, however, a vicious cycle was established. The less he felt in control of his thinking, the less he trusted any outside help. He required anxiety-relieving medication before he could give up the other drugs and finally begin to study tactics to organize better. He was able to work on the gaps that had developed in his basic body of information.

□ An example of a more severe type of response to disorganization is Eric, a 5-year-old kindergartner, who was referred for study because he seemed "spacey" in school and who often appeared to forget what he

was doing in the middle of a task. From time to time he inappropriately recited poems or read words (in an intellectually impressive way) when people tried to play or talk with him in school. He seemed an intelligent and anxious preschooler who wanted to do well, but often appeared disinterested or out of touch. In consultation, Eric was found to be preoccupied with unresolved separation fears and age-appropriate worries regarding aggression. He also worried about losing people and about who would protect him from being hurt in his group experiences at school; at these times he became anxious, and the built-in tendency to disorganize occurred. Diagnostic psychological testing showed Eric to have a mild perceptual motor problem, which was markedly exacerbated when he was stressed. Although he showed no severe emotional illness, he was clearly fearful—almost as though the earlier fears were making him feel vulnerable when the helpless disorganization occurred. Old fears and toileting mistakes helped him avoid school and get others to care for him. By avoiding, withdrawing, changing the subject and mobilizing repetitive "intellectual" exercises, he afforded himself temporary relief—at the expense of being out of touch and put down by his peers. He disguised the problem of disorganization, almost to a point that only the end-result of a poor self-image in an intelligent boy was evident. This type of severe reaction to disorganization was felt to need a combined approach in which an individual treatment program collaborated with both the teachers and the parents in helping Eric to give up his fears and deal with the realities of his everyday functioning.

LOOKING FOR REASONS

You can see from these cases that the presenting behavior or symptoms are in themselves nonspecific. They only tell us that something is wrong. When you look further to find the reasons for the child needing a symptom, we suggest that you keep your eyes and ears open to their pattern of disorganization of thinking and acting under stress. It can be the source of *inner* stress and interfere with the ability to deal with *outer* stress. Evident from these examples are some extremely self-defeating responses to the tendency to disorganize under stress. While such responses can be understood as children's attempts at protecting themselves from a self-experience of helplessness, they actually complicate our understanding of these children in addition to "locking in" the problems of the troubled youngster.

(1) The responses of *avoidance* and *withdrawal* prevent an integrating of the stressful experience. These attempts at self-protection usually put the child in a position where constructive coping energies are not found; and the resultant frightening helplessness cannot be a growth experience.

(2) Similarly, various responses that are understood within the framework of *dependency*—i.e., those of children who look for someone to take care of them when they feel helpless—are self-defeating and prevent the conflict from becoming an "organizer." Some children respond to their fear of being unable to mobilize themselves by becoming excessively dependent on others, so that their teacher or parents must carry on the responsibility of negotiating stressful experiences for them. Some children, in contrast, attempt

to reverse this response pattern by adopting an "I know it all" excessively independent posture. Others create still another type of behavior, which can be labeled "acting out," calculated to make the teacher or the parent feel helpless so that they won't feel helpless themselves. All of these responses actually are one extreme or the other on the dependency continuum. At the same time, they are self-defeating behaviors, which prevent the child from receiving help from others.

(3) A third general response-style that can be extremely self-defeating for the child who disorganizes under stress is the *exaggeration* of earlier, unresolved fears, such as Evelyn displayed. Some children become preoccupied with fears of losing their loved ones or of getting hurt or dying themselves. In a sense, the fears occupy the child's mind and perhaps temporarily move attention away from a present stressful experience; but in the end the fears only exaggerate the cognitive disorganization.

Overall, an almost universal response to these self-defeating styles, often unmodified and unrecognized, is a poor self-image. This downgraded sense of self in turn has to be defended against by the child, who needs to stop the progressive feeling of helplessness; and we are left with an even more disguised and complicated picture. In these instances, we must watch to see if the "methods" the child uses for protection get in the way of participating in our efforts to offer help. When this interference occurs, we may understand that we are being sent a signal that a struggle against an inside inner feeling of poor self-confidence is getting in the way of interacting with others outside themselves.

WAYS TO IMPROVE COPING SKILLS

Finally, it is clear that the teacher or parent can help the child who is struggling with the tendency to disorganize under stress.

The first step is recognizing individual differences in children's styles of reaction to stress. The child who has a hysterical personality organization (such as Evelyn) responds to stress with a fear that it will keep on going and get worse. When asked to respond orally in front of the class, the child whose response style is hysterical needs to be helped to stop the disorganization and feelings of helplessness by assurance that the situation is not a catastrophe, can be ameliorated and will not go on forever. In this way, the child is prepared to develop techniques to stop the self-defeating process—such as pausing when the mind goes blank and taking a short "time out" to reorganize. These children are often able to return to the stressful task or situation in a more integrated and constructive way instead of feeling hopeless about it.

Children with a compulsive personality foundation can also be assisted to learn how to stop themselves from feeling helpless when the disorganization begins. For example, a child relatively weak in mathematics may experience high levels of stress and the tendency to disorganize when confronted with a multi-step problem. A helpful strategy is to encourage these children to stop themselves for a moment as soon as the disorganization begins. Then they can isolate and concentrate on one small detail or aspect of the task that is stressful. This action can enable them to return to the whole task.

In looking in the classroom for the problem of dissociation of thinking and acting, one should proceed with caution. This pattern should be differentiated from that of distractibility and other forms of difficulty in maintaining attention. In other words, repeated observation of an integrative difficulty is necessary before a child is so la-

beled—along with awareness of which types of stress trigger it off, as well as its degree and the child's recovery-time and patterns.

When no clearly evident response style is understood or no strategy is effective in aiding the child who disorganizes under stress, psychological and psychiatric consultation can be helpful in defining the sources of anxiety and the way the child is trying to protect himself. A consultation may delineate the unique personality makeup, giving clues to the type of remediation that can help the handicapping process to be recognized by both the child and the helper. The blocking pattern can be interrupted so that the child can subsequently return to the task situation at hand. Additionally, one often finds that this pattern is an inherited part of the child's makeup. Such a finding can be useful, because parents who have had such a problem and successfully mastered it can be resources for the child and his/her teacher. The parents may be the experts in teaching effective tactics they have learned to use automatically to keep the tendency for disorganization under better control.

Neuroscientists are currently studying especially successful organizers as well as people who have a low threshold for disorganization. As of yet, no answers have been discovered with regard to differences in the structure of the brain or the electrical-biochemical processes that make disorganization more probable. Until the answers in terms of brain function are available, we have a responsibility to identify and help the children with this type of handicap. They can be helped!

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